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May 10, 2001

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**Episcopal News Service**

2001-109

## Pope John Paul II continues ministry of reconciliation with trips to Greece and Syria

by James Solheim

(ENS) In the twilight of his pontificate, Pope John Paul II has extended his ministry of reconciliation with trips to Greece and Syria, bringing a message of peace to Orthodox cousins and to a troubled Middle East.

On May 4, he made the first visit to Greece by a pope in 1291 years, trying to defuse hostilities that have been simmering since the East-West split in the Christian Church. In Athens he asked God to forgive Roman Catholics for sins committed against Orthodox believers over the past millennium.

The visit came at the invitation of Greek President Costis Stephanopoulos not the church. When he arrived May 4 at the Athens airport he was welcomed by government officials and bishops from the country's Roman Catholic minority--but no major Orthodox church leaders.

In a private meeting with Archbishop Christodoulos, the Greek primate said that the visit "brings us joy," but it was a joy "overshadowed by the fact of our division." He then listed some of the religious differences, citing especially the sacking of Constantinople, capital of the Byzantine Empire, by the Crusaders in 1204 and the Vatican's failure to condemn the partition of the island of Cyprus following the Turkish invasion of 1974. The Orthodox are also unhappy with Eastern Catholic churches that celebrate the Orthodox liturgy but are linked to Rome, regarding them as incursions.

"For the occasions past and present, when we are



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For the occasions past and present, when sons and daughters of the Catholic Church have sinned by action or omission against their Orthodox brothers and sisters, may the Lord grant us forgiveness," said the statement.

Later the pope and archbishop met at a spot where St. Paul had preached to sign a "common declaration," agreeing to "do everything in our power, so that the Christian roots of Europe and its Christian soul may be preserved." They also condemned "all recourse to violence, proselytism and fanaticism, in the name of religion."

### A taste of tension

The pope received a first-hand taste of that fanaticism when he arrived in Damascus where he endured a tirade from President Bashar al-Assad accusing Israel of torturing and murdering Palestinians and suggesting that Christians and Muslims make common cause against those "who try to kill the principles of all religions with the same mentality with which they betrayed Jesus Christ.... In the same way they tried to commit treachery against Prophet Muhammad."

On the other hand, the pope stressed religious tolerance and understanding, pointing out that "so often hopes for peace have been raised only to be dashed by new waves of violence."

In a speech to dozens of Syrian Christian and Islamic leaders he said, "For all the times that Muslims and Christians have offended one another, we need to seek forgiveness." He expressed his hopes that "our two great religious communities" would engage "in respectful dialogue, never more as communities in conflict."

John Paul became the first pope to visit a mosque, the great Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, accompanied by the Grand Mufti of Syria, Ahmed Kuftaro. The huge mosque was originally a pagan temple converted to a Christian church in the fourth century, replaced by a mosque after the Arabs conquered Damascus in 639. The pope offered a silent prayer at what is revered as the tomb of St. John the Baptist.

### Building a legacy



Commenting on the pope's two stops, the *Times* of London said, "Both form part of what is emerging as the 80-year-old pope's final goal in the twilight of his long papacy: to heal the divisions within Christianity through his drive for ecumenism, and simultaneously to achieve reconciliation between the world's three main monotheistic religions." In 1986 he was the first pontiff to visit a synagogue.

Other press accounts, however, pointed to the stiff opposition by many Orthodox and also many Muslims to the pope's visit. "History teaches us that Western pilgrimages have covert political motives," said a leading Sunni Muslim leader who helped block a joint Christian-Muslim prayer in the mosque.

On his way back to Rome, the pope stopped at Malta, where he was warmly embraced by the island's overwhelming Roman Catholic population.

**--James Solheim is director of the Office of News and Information for the Episcopal Church.**

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